Creating Effective Web Communications at BOLDFlash

Smokie Lee

Southern New Hampshire University

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The affordability of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the Internet have enabled companies unprecedented access to a global community of customers and assets (Conger, 1998; Gerson & Gerson, 2013), while giving consumers finer control over how they interact with businesses and other consumers (“Audience,” 2015). In some cases, the WWW gives firms access to markets they would never have had access to otherwise (Gerson & Gerson, 2013). Access to the Internet has changed customer's expectations regarding communication (Conger, 1998), and forced business to rethink how they communicate with consumers lest they lose business (Six, 2015).

Every channel of communication has benefits and drawbacks, and the web is no exception. Readers interact with copy on the web much differently than they do with printed material (Gerson & Gerson, 2013). Readers tend to skim content instead of read, with some estimating only 20%-28% of a website's content being read on any given visit (Affairs, 2013). Not only do readers only absorb bits and pieces of content, the very nature of the web itself is based on linked fragments like nodes in a network (“World Wide Web,” 2015). This deconstructed nature of information differs from more usual forms of communication that are chronological or otherwise linear in fashion (Hart-Davidson, 2001) and means that user paths, or the paths that users take to reach a certain goal like obtaining information, are incredibly complex and nearly impossible to predict even with the highly sophisticated tools used today such as eye tracking software (Six, 2015).

To help us navigate these difficult challenges, I have created a guide on how to craft successful technical communication on the web. I've identified three key points a technical communication message must be to be successful on the web: universal, credible, and ethical.

## Universal

* Accessible
* Concise
* Localized
* Shareable

Accessibility on the web is usually centered on the discussion of those with disabilities such as sight- or hearing-impaired users (“World Wide Web,” 2015), and because user experience is just as important as the message (Six, 2015) this is a foundational aspect of usability (Affairs, 2013). Usability is important to ensure you can reach all of your intended audience (Gerson & Gerson, 2013), that other audiences have equal access to your message (“World Wide Web,” 2015), and that your message is shareable to other audiences (Affairs, 2013). Being concise in your message (Singh, 2012) and writing in plain language (Affairs, 2013) will increase the universality of your communication (“World Wide Web,” 2015). Universal design, also known as inclusive design, is a design concept that seeks to create products and services that are accessible to all users regardless of ability, location, or any other factor (“Universal design,” 2015). Localizing a message to a particular language or culture is a well-established way to create more universal content (Gerson & Gerson, 2013). With billions of users on the World Wide Web (“World Wide Web,” 2015) accessing the Internet with dozens of dozens of devices (Gerson & Gerson, 2013) and sharing your messages with unknown audiences, universal design is more and more relevant to technical communication. For example, many companies have an online support site where customers can obtain documentation or contact customer service (Gerson & Gerson, 2013), so ensuring that online help is accessible to all current and potential customers is vital to a company's credibility.

## Credible

* Visually Appealing
* Clear
* Concise
* Accurate

A message that is seen as credible is one that is seen as trustworthy, or worthy of belief (“Credible,” n.d.). The visual design of a message is the most common determinant of credibility among web users (Gerson & Gerson, 2013), so ensuring that your message looks good and is accurate is important to credibility. This sort of message can be used to establish, increase or maintain credibility (Gerson & Gerson, 2013), can help a company react to a crisis and typically generates trust that a company is working in the best interest of their customers (Conger, 1998). Technical communication is mostly about persuasion (“Purdue OWL: The Rhetorical Situation,” n.d.) and establishing credibility is the first step in persuasion (Conger, 1998). Credibility affects the flow of communications in companies (Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, & Johnson, 1994), and messages that contain confusing or irrelevant information can lead to a loss of credibility (Conger, 1998). The clarity of a communication directly impacts a company's credibility as well as the quality of a product (Hart-Davidson, 2001), so it's important that your communications be clear and concise (Bhatia, 2011).

## Ethical

* Clear
* Accurate
* Confidential

Ethics are the study of "right conduct and good living" (“Ethics - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” n.d.), and to be ethical is to follow the standard rules of conduct of a group or organization to which one belongs, including society and businesses (“Ethical,” n.d.). A lack of a communication framework or an inherently secretive one has the potential to lead to unethical actions in any business (O’Toole & Bennis, 2009), so it's important to create and follow a communication strategy that is clear. In technical communication, to be ethical is to follow the laws or regulations of any governments or agencies which might be stakeholders to your message, promote the public good, keep private information private unless legally obligated otherwise, and to be fair in all practices and communications (“Ethical Principles,” n.d.). Privacy and security are two major areas of ethical standards (“Information privacy,” 2015), and keeping online user's information private and secure is the law in many countries (Gerson & Gerson, 2013). Demonstrating adherence to ethical standards increases a company's credibility (O’Toole & Bennis, 2009), therefore maintaining the security and privacy of your customers is vital to the credibility of your company (Gerson & Gerson, 2013). Ensuring your message is clear, accurate, and confidential when necessary can increase or maintain credibility.

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